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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BUCHAREST 000593

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SUBJECT: ROMANIA: NATIONAL LIBERAL PARTY MIRED IN SUMMER
DOLDRUMS

Classified By: CDA Jeri Guthrie-Corn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The center-right National Liberal Party (PNL) is on a losing streak. After its exclusion from the governing coalition following the November 2008 parliamentary elections, the party underperformed in the June 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections and PNL presidential candidate Crin Antonescu lags badly in the polls. An apparent attempt to differentiate the party and Antonescu from Basescu's pro-American image risks alienating the public and marking PNL as anti-Basescu and little else. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) PNL has so far failed to capitalize on its opposition status during the economic crisis, and now finds its presidential candidate Crin Antonescu running anywhere from third to fifth in current polls. Pundits and party insiders accurately perceive Antonescu as an unconvincing candidate, hamstrung by a weak party structure, intra-party divisions and a lack of fresh ideas on the campaign trail. Statements in the presidential candidate's platform that suggest a mild foreign policy tilt away from the U.S. and toward Russia appear to lack substance and seem designed to distinguish the party from Basescu's perceived pro-American positions. The PNL risks being defined by the public (and us) as viscerally anti-Basescu, and little else.

¶3. (C) PNL was the unanimously perceived loser of the June European Parliamentary elections. In contrast to the Liberal Democrats (PDL) and Social Democrats (PSD), which both performed as expected with 30 percent, the Liberals mustered only 14 percent of the vote, short of their target of 20. PNL's weaknesses were numerous: loss of incumbent seats and a resulting drop in party morale; new, untested leadership; insufficient activism; and disorganized branches in many communities. In addition, several Antonescu consultants describe the party's decision-making process as chaotic, the chain of command slow to respond to new challenges, and the get-out-the-vote effort unfocused -- especially in urban areas. The party also lacks PDL's and PSD's experience in vote counting and developing records of voting patterns.

¶4. (C) Crin Antonescu's leadership provides a further area of concern for party consultants. Many see him as soft, at times overwhelmed by the party's numerous issues. They tell us that party discipline is weak, as is the sense of solidarity around Antonescu. Despite bringing close associates of former Prime Minister and PNL Chairman Calin Popescu Tariceanu on board Antonescu's campaign team, the party still appears divided into two camps, a testament to Antonescu's lack of skill in winning over rivals.

¶5. (C) PNL's voice has rarely been loud enough for PDL and PSD -- the two most popular parties -- to interrupt their constant bickering. Antonescu's campaign trips all but stopped after the EP elections. Moreover, he continues to top the list of members most absent from Parliament. Recently PNL gained some visibility by sponsoring and chairing two ad-hoc parliamentary committees to investigate

PDL ministers Monica Iacob-Ridzi and Elena Udrea, but this alone is unlikely to win significant electoral support.

¶6. (C) PNL's presidential strategy aims to have the party expand and aggregate around its candidate, more in the American style than the European model centered on ideology and party. If elected, Antonescu promises to be "a different kind of President," and he kicked off his presidential bid with Obama-like slogans emphasizing positive change. However, Antonescu speeches tend toward stale denunciations of what the PNL casts as Basescu's egregious misconduct in office.

¶7. (C). In terms of relations with the U.S., Antonescu's presidential platform contains a vague call "for a re-founding of the partnership with the United States" based on Romania's having achieved full membership in NATO and the EU. "The first step of this process would be clarifying the issue of entry visas for the United States," the platform document declares. Until the mid-2000s, PNL was the most pro-Western party in Romania. However, during the 2005-2008 government of PNL Prime Minister Tariceanu, the party opposed Basescu's pro-Americanism. For example, in 2006 high-level PNL members unilaterally announced Romania's pullout from Iraq. Party leaders later claimed they were merely staking out anti-Basescu ground; the new PNL leadership privately tells us they weren't consulted and they disapproved of the Iraq statement.

¶8. (C) While suggesting a more "balanced" approach toward the U.S., Antonescu's electoral platform also recommends a positive shift towards Russia: "As President of Romania,

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relations with the Russian Federation represent a priority of my foreign policy project... Relations with Russia have had areas of inadmissible hovering, reflective of (an) inability to grasp the strategic importance of good relations with the Eastern neighbor."

¶9. (C) COMMENT. The PNL's major priority is to differentiate itself from Basescu and capitalize on its perception of Basescu's mismanagement of Romanian-Russian relations. In the view of PNL leaders Basescu erred by creating an adversarial relationship with the Russians during the winter 2008-2009 natural gas crisis, thereby damaging Romanian economic interests. Faced with internal malaise and a daunting set of challenges, the party at this point seems unable to raise its sights beyond the visceral anti-Basescu sentiment that determines its positions. It will need a serious game changer (a major corruption scandal involving PDL or PSD leaders, for example) between now and Election Day for Antonescu's prospects to improve. END COMMENT.
GUTHRIE-CORN